

Police in riot gear stand by as a family of 1,500 roll up for their big party by the sea

BY ANDREW RUNCOMBE

THE UNSHAVEN man lumbering along the promenade at Great Yarmouth yesterday lunchtime was obviously feeling aggrieved. "Criminal damage, criminal damage - that's what I read in the paper this morning. It really riles me," he belted, a dirty checked jacket fastened across his ample girth by a single button.

"Look. Do you see any criminal damage? Have those houses over there been damaged? No, they haven't. Has this fence been damaged? No, it hasn't. So where is the criminal damage? There isn't any. It's just that they don't like the travelling man."

It is easy enough to feel aggrieved on Great Yarmouth seafront on a freezing December lunchtime. The wind howls relentlessly off the flat water of the North Sea and the Pleasure Beach funfair, empty and locked up for the winter, creaks like a ghost town. It's all a bit like something out of a *Scooby Doo* cartoon.

And yet it is in this out-of-season Norfolk resort, in a car park overlooking the sea, that 1,500 Irish travellers have decided to celebrate Christmas and see in the millennium.

The travellers say they are all part of one extended family originally from Limerick. After some of them visited Great Yarmouth for a wedding last summer they decided that they would come back, *en masse*, for the festive season.

They started arriving on 23 December. At first it was just one or two groups with a couple of caravans and cars, but rapidly numbers swelled, with members of an extended family clan arriving from Ireland, Britain and mainland Europe.

Now, with the biggest party just a couple of days away, the South Beach promenade has been turned into a temporary town of gleaming modern vans and countless scraggy mongrels. It is amazing, one of the travellers said, what you can organise with mobile phones.

The arrival of so many people clearly took the police and local authorities by surprise. Norfolk Police admit that they were initially "overwhelmed" by the numbers and were forced to draft in hundreds of other officers from across East Anglia as part of "Operation Caravan". Great Yarmouth Borough Council, meanwhile, appears to do little other than insist that, despite the obvious lack of toilets and rubbish skips, there is no threat to public health.

Many locals, equally surprised by the seafront being taken over by the travellers, are

simply wishing they would leave as quickly as they arrived.

Although the police say there has been no increase in crime in the area, there are stories of criminal damage, reports of theft, and whispers about petrol being siphoned out of cars.

"They are parking down the pavement, they are using the beach as a toilet, they are racing up and down in their cars," said Jennifer Rowlands, whose seafront view is now obscured by a series of caravans and a temporary police office in a mobile home. "They are getting away with it because they claim to be an ethnic minority."

One of Mrs Rowlands' seafront neighbours, who gave her name as Linda, said: "The police are now out every night in the riot gear."

"Friends of mine and people in town are petrified what will happen on New Year's Eve. At the moment we have got police here from Norwich and Ipswich but they will have to go back to their own units. I just hope it is going to be all right."

Some businesses have re-



Vans at the car park overlooking the sea, and a sign (right) outside a public house on the town's promenade Rob Howarth/David Sandison

acted by refusing to have anything to do with the travellers. At The Marine public house, also on the promenade, two signs warned that not only were the toilets for the use of patrons only but that as a result of "company policy", travellers were barred.

The landlord, Bob Balls,

explained that such company policy was designed to keep the locals - and not the outsiders - happy. "It was one or the other," he said.

Not all businesses have reacted in this way. Andrew Mavroudis, landlord of the Rok Bar, one of the pubs that welcomes the travellers, said he

was busy every night. "Since I have got to know them, I think they are great," he said.

"They know how to enjoy themselves, they really know how to enjoy themselves. We have not had any serious trouble and on the occasions there has been bother they have sorted it out among themselves."

Another couple, who run a fish and chip restaurant, admitted, "They have been very good for business. At this time of year we would be closed up for the winter but we opened up because they were here."

The travellers themselves are natural diplomats. No, there has been no trouble, they

say. No, the local people have made us feel very welcome, they claim.

As they talk, spotless children in clean, smart clothes dart in and out of the spotless caravans and young men race up and down in gleaming cars, as often as not Mercedes or BMWs. But push a little further



and it is clear that this community is well used to cold welcomes. "The police are giving us a lot of hassle," said Dan Daly, 20, a married man with two young children. "The young men like to drive up and down with the ladies in the cars but the police won't let us. It is just about different beliefs."

His friend, who declined to be named, added: "It is about a different culture. People do not really want to understand. We are not going to cause any trouble, we are just here for the holiday. What do they want all these police here for? Are they trying to provoke trouble?"

The travellers say they will leave within days of the millennium, the extended family splitting up and people heading back to their jobs as road workers and traders. By 4 January at the latest they will have gone, leaving nothing but beer bottles and other rubbish.

In the meantime, they, if not the more permanent residents of Great Yarmouth, are looking forward to their party.

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Children from the convoy of 1,500 Irish travellers who decided to celebrate Christmas and see in the millennium at Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, to the alarm of some residents David Sandison

